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ABSTRACT

A superintendent of schools suggests reasons for the continuation and expansion of foreign language programs in public schools. Prominent in his discussion are concepts which focus on the international and domestic scene, historical developments in language instruction dating from 1957, high attrition rates in current programs, foreign language in elementary schools (FLES), articulation problems among schools, language laboratories, and various types of innovation. The author concludes by making a plea for diversification in course design and implementation. (RL)

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# SHOULD FOREIGN LANGUAGE BE ELIMINATED FROM THE CURRICULUM?

Almost daily headlines such as "ASTRONAUTS WALK ON MOON" or "NIXON APPROVES SST" remind us that our globe is practically, if not literally, shrinking. Because of this phenomenon American education has taken on international and global dimensions. Students now must be consciously taught to identify with humanity in general; their horizons must be broadened through intellectual and cultural experiences. We must train better Americans -- Americans who are willing to look at all sides of any question.

On both the domestic and international scenes we cannot afford to tolerate ignorance or lack of communication which breeds distrust, hatred, fear, and even -- war. Increasing numbers of our federal employees -- consuls, diplomats, technical advisors, Peace Corps volunteers, and businessmen -- are in need of bilingual training. Americans cannot continue to be accused of snobbishness and arrogance because of their dependence on an interpreter and/or because they know little of the cultural heritage of their foreign home.

Language has been called a crude and imprecise tool but it is the only one we have for expressing our thoughts. Less than a year ago Senator Yarborough of Texas addressed a group of foreign language teachers similar to yours and suggested that "Nations must learn to understand nations; peoples must learn to understand peoples; man must learn to understand his fellow man. It is through language -- perhaps through language alone -- that this understanding can be achieved."

In the past decade as a nation and as educators we have progressed considerably in our endeavors to make more Americans bilingual and in our attempts to develop human empathy which can be the base of intercultural understanding.

Since the inception of the NDEA in 1958, millions of dollars in federal and local funds have helped us and our students by providing institutes and equipment to better prepare foreign language teachers and in an endeavor to facilitate the audio-lingual approach to teaching foreign language. During these same years our school population has increased tremendously and so has the number of elementary and secondary pupils who have been studying a foreign language.

We know we have achieved much in our efforts to improve and expand foreign language teaching. Administrators and teachers alike can see the progress that has been made but the disturbing paradox of social change is that improvement brings the need for more improvement in constantly accelerating demands. The post-Sputnik era is over; citizens and politicians are carefully scrutinizing public expenditures, especially those that do not aid the masses. The growing cry is for every subject to be made relevant to the needs and interests of the many -- that is, the needs and interests of our society as they are viewed by those who are in positions of listening and of being heard.

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As an administrator, my foremost concern with foreign language teaching at the present time, therefore, is the attrition rate. It is enormous! Despite the sizeable enrollment increases of recent years, we still have less than one-third of our total United States school population even studying a foreign language because almost one-fourth of our high schools do not offer instruction in a modern language. In 1959 Dr. Conant suggested that at least the upper 20 percent of academically talented students should study no less than four years of one foreign language and yet in 1969 the number who do is less than seven percent. Two-thirds of our students drop out after two years of language study and nine-tenths after three years. It is becoming increasingly difficult for administrators to document the accelerating need of funds for a discipline that affects so few.

Education is for everyone in a democratic society. Many FLES programs have been offered to students with a wide range of aptitudes and attitudes and they have not detracted from the other disciplines. In 1959 NASSP suggested that all students have the opportunity to study a foreign language whether they are going to college or not. As teachers and administrators, we do hold the key to foreign language instruction and thereby have an obligation to maintain positive community interest in it. Is it not possible to have 75-100 percent of our secondary students studying a foreign language at the end of the next decade? Some of you may say, why should there be? Others still believe strongly that your real work is to perpetuate yourselves -- to create more foreign language teachers and not to spread knowledge of a foreign language, culture, and literature to all people. Here are some of my reasons for not wanting to perpetuate part of the public curriculum for only an elite group:

1. Foreign language study should be predicated on the need of societies to co-exist with other contemporary national cultures. More than just a few Americans need to listen, understand, speak and read a foreign language to facilitate all kinds of American contacts in foreign lands and to better understand what is happening at home as well as abroad.

2. In addition to the utilitarian aspects of foreign language, our knowledge of literature and culture aids in understanding citizens of other nations and in breaking down of sterotypes so necessary in our own nation today.

3. The study of a foreign language increases verbal skills in English in addition to facilitating the study of a second foreign language.

4. Disadvantaged students can benefit in many ways from foreign language study. Personal satisfaction and a heightening of educational morale can result from language study by disadvantaged students and result in a more positive attitude toward themselves and their schools. And when the initial approach to language instruction emphasizes hearing and speech, they can also benefit in their English speech habits.

5. Adaptation of language teaching to the maturity, interests, abilities and psychological needs of all students need not

necessarily mean the lowering of standards.

The necessary changes in objectives, materials, curriculum and techniques which are required of us if we are to lower the fantastic foreign language dropout rate can, in my opinion, make for a better foreign language program for students at all levels.

There is much to be done as we endeavor to improve foreign language programs. We all have an important role to play; I have mine and you do, also. Together we must recruit the help of others--principals, guidance counselors, instructors at all grade levels, publishers, testing experts, hardware salesmen and others to help write the script, construct the properties and find the direction. It is from the teacher, department head and principal, however, that the district administrator gets his cue--but, as always, the classroom teacher is the true key to success.

If we are going to have more youngsters study in our language programs, we must first try to rescue those who never enroll in a formal language course in the secondary schools. Research on the results of FLES programs throughout the land is inconclusive, and FLES has not been a spectacular success according to some who think it is difficult to justify the great investment in human and financial resources which FLES programs require. But are secondary teachers justified in their criticism of their elementary colleagues who teach a language? In no other discipline is the basic groundwork of a subject not desired or appreciated. Some research states that FLES students do read, write, listen and speak better when they reach the secondary level than those who do not have early exposure to a language. And more of those students maintain continuity in one language through twelfth grade. Perhaps we need to remember that the youngsters involved in FLES have already extended their environment from "my family" and "my country" to "my world." Should we not have a continuing foreign language program built on a foundation of elementary instruction?

In the same sense we need much better liaison between junior and senior high programs. Frequently both levels suffer losses of students when their goals and philosophies are not the same and continuous during these years. Inter-staff cooperation is a must at every level from elementary to college if we are to meet the challenge that faces us.

At grade six the first great exodus of foreign language students occurs. It next comes at the end of grade ten. Many, bogged down by required courses and disappointed by the routine of literature-grammar-translation, decide they should drop their study of a foreign language. Many of these same students, needless to say, attend a college requiring a language for graduation. Frequently they start a new language because of the lost years and benefit that can and should come from continuous instruction. Are we proud of the fact that only three percent of our high school students ever reach level III of a language?

We must begin to think of more creative ways to hold these students. Perhaps new kinds of M O S (Maintenance of skills) courses are the answer where students can spend less than five days per week in foreign language study. Or, shall we give more thought to seminars, independent study, committee and club work, or use of the language in a field of interest outside the classroom. Perhaps juniors should have opportunities for summer courses which are free from other pressures or they could

travel, camp, or serve as teacher aides at Board of Education expense. Diversity must be the key word. Rather than Cicero, Caesar or Virgil, perhaps Latin III classes might enjoy medieval Latin with its drinking songs or adaptations of Aesop's Fables; or possibly interest in language patterns could be maintained if French teachers took time for discussion of French cooking or fashions with the girls or of small French cars and the Grand Prix with the boys. Contemporary music of any land would probably engage most high school students and such topics as unrest, war, poverty and the future will gain interest in another language. Many ways must also be found to improve the present status of instruction of advanced language sections. Even in a high school like ours in Shaker Heights, with 2,000 students, 95 percent college-bound, seniors complain that all that's left of students in French IV classes are the "brains," those who could probably learn a language on their own anyway!

Perhaps some of you are already thinking that we'll need more dialogue between secondary teachers and CEEB examination procedures if change is to be affected. That is so true. Testing must be kept attuned to changing objectives and this must be done on a nationwide basis. Though we cannot be completely blamed for college foreign language dropouts, perhaps we could help to do something about our secondary students who do gain an acceptable control of a language but are not encouraged to take even a single advanced literature course. My personal experience --- a son at Middlebury, so famous for its foreign language study, who satisfied his language requirement with a CEEB score of over 700 and has never studied a language in college!

Now let us turn and focus our attention on that large, untouched group -- the majority of students, well over 50 percent, who do not study a foreign language. There must be new ways to gain their interest, to hold it, and to provide for the wide range of aptitudes and abilities in this group. One answer is to break away from the routine tradition which has throttled so much language teaching. Our instruction has never kept pace with the advances in our knowledge of language and language learning processes. Now is the time to plan and implement innovative classroom techniques. This mass of youngsters <u>can</u> learn to understand and speak a second language; language is an indispensable tool for understanding others and we are failing American education and the country if we don't recognize this fact and do something about it.

The revolution to the audio-lingual approach was a strong one. Changes in the next decade may even be greater. We must be pragmatic to the extent that we employ those methods <u>that work</u> in our language training. We also must be eclecticists, addressing ourselves to modes of instruction that tend to mitigate the difficulties. One-channeled instruction must become multi-channeled. The roles of teacher and student are changing in every subject. Learning is possible in so many ways other than with the teacher in front of the class. Even in the community, far away from classrooms, we can find learning opportunities. This is especially so in our urban areas where many different languages are spoken daily.

The language teacher <u>must</u> not fear her peers or be directed by college requirements as she tries small group instruction, individualized projects or programming of various sorts. Many administrators are more receptive than teachers may think to such changes as flexible scheduling, tracking, and team teaching or almost anything else that will enhance classroom instruction. Some schools have already had

had extremely positive results from nongrading of foreign language students at the secondary level which allows several levels of instruction with a small enrollment consisting of students from a broad age range.

The insular position of the foreign language teacher must be shattered. Not how he differs from his peers but how they are similar should come to the forefront of our concern. Team teaching has some great potential in this regard, not only within the language department but in our attempts to correlate foreign language instruction with other fields such as art, music, history and literature.

Our course offerings need to be more inclusive. Many school districts and other groups of communities must find new ways in which they can share human and financial resources. Higher levels of instruction in western language and some of the critically needed languages can only be offered by cooperative efforts between districts or public and independent schools. For the most part, Western European languages have been our only course offerings. In fact, today only one-half of one percent of secondary students are enrolled in the uncommon languages--Chinese, Japanese, Swedish and Portuguese. Although one-half million American soldiers are spending a minimum of one year in Vietnam, instruction in Vietnamese is still absent from our high school curriculum; and most of our military personnel cannot even use French which is the second language of many Vietnamese.

A decade ago the goals of foreign language were defined as two-fold. (1) The acquisition of a skill for practical use, and (2) a progressive experience in a foreign culture. We truly have made progress in teaching oral skills, in the preparation of language teachers, and in the improvement of some of our techniques. But too often we have failed miserably in achieving the second goal. You may say it is because we have lacked materials for teaching the many facets of culture. But it is our responsibility to demand that such materials and publications be made available because culture which is the sum total way of life of a nation must be understood to really appreciate and understand the language.

There is a similar lack of diversified teaching materials and audio-visual supplies in most language classrooms. A single tape or even 2500 cannot assure that a class is being given individualized instruction. We merely touch the surface in the use of media when we install a language lab and buy tapes or other media equipment. Although we have made progress in the use of labs, they are not a panacea for good foreign language instruction and we all know that improving quality of instruction takes teacher time and effort no matter what tools are available. The time has come for teachers and administrators to let the publishers and hardware salesmen know our specific needs. Our future plans should not be dependent on their production; rather, theirs should be dependent on ours. The Modern Language Association Center and the Center for Applied Linguistics which now serve as clearing houses for a national Educational Research Information Center should help us with the latest research, necessary to make sensible recommendations.

More than a few language teachers still build their "reputations" on national examination results. They claim that we will "water down" language courses if they serve heterogeneous groups. We must break down the traditional stress on language as grammar, use a new psychological approach, and make the subject relevant and stimulating for all students. Without a feeling of success the student is lost, and language teachers have already lost too many students. We must be challenged to

search for new strategies and behaviors. We must adopt Bugelski's proposition in his book, The Psychology of Learning Applied to Teaching, that: "When a student does not learn, the teacher fails the course."

We hear that the European youngsters learn a second language more readily than our children because they have a need to and because they grow up with a knowledge of cultural diversity. Our children have that same need. We are now in the family of nations as an international force. There have been times that we have offended instead of befriended because of our notion of U. S. cultural superiority. We must overcome this monocultural provincialism which now pervades and weakens our position. Through language all of our children and youth can and should gain the thrilling experiences of real communication with other human beings.

As Harold Howe, former U. S. Commissioner, has said, "Diversity is not to be feared or suspected, but enjoyed and valued, and we would be well on the way toward achieving the equality which we have always proclaimed as a national characteristic." Your response to diversity may well determine whether foreign languages will be part of the curriculum of the future!

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